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Legislature Passes Bill to Expand Veterans State Education Benefits

Bill would also preserve IT services, Fund Solvency

(MADISON) - The Wisconsin State Legislature today passed 2005 Senate Bill 613, legislation that would expand the "Wisconsin G.I. Bill" program to provide full, free tuition at state schools for qualifying state veterans.

"For eligible Wisconsin veterans and their dependents, this expansion of veterans' educational benefits is perhaps the most dramatic since the creation of the original G.I. Bill during World War II," said Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary John A. Scocos.

Among the bill's other provisions is an expansion of eligibility for the Wisconsin G.I. Bill to include the dependents of veterans who die as the result of a service-connected illness or injury, and a simplification of the current program by removing a current requirement to demonstrate residency at the time the disability rating is awarded.

"Decades from now, we will look back on this as a watershed event, not only for Wisconsin veterans, but for the educational investment and economic development of our great state," said Scocos.

The bill also provides an exemption for the state Department of Veterans Affairs from a consolidation of information technology and staff. The state Department of Justice and the Office of the State Public Defender received similar exemptions under legislation enacted last year. The exemption would save the state's Veterans Trust Fund nearly \$300,000 per year, and would ensure the privacy of veterans military discharge, health, claims, and other records.

Additionally, the measure would ensure that County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) continue to receive needed state information technology support. In Wisconsin, state law requires each of the state's 72 counties to have a county veterans service officer, and directs small annual grants to the counties to offset some of the associated costs. CVSOs provide direct assistance to the state's approximately 464,000 veterans to ensure access to earned federal and state veterans benefits, programs, and services.

Currently, WDVA provides the counties with secure remote access to the state's veterans benefits information and application systems, including online access to specialized computer applications. Additionally, the department provides CVSOs and their staff with information technology training and dedicated, on-call technical support. Without the exemption, current assistance would be eliminated.

SB 613 provides additional measures intended to aid in ensuring the solvency of the state's Veterans Trust Fund, including allowing interfund transfers that would augment the Fund. Legislation enacted in 2005 implemented stabilizing measures that extended the solvency of the Veterans Trust Fund over ten years, and included new revenue measures creating a tax form check-off and redirecting proceeds of state veterans' license plates to the Fund.

"Wisconsin's veterans will substantially benefit from this dramatic legislation, made possible by the unified efforts of the state legislature and its leadership in passing these remarkable measures," said Scocos.

The Wisconsin G.I. Bill program may be used at the state-supported University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical College System institutions. Under the bill, the expansion from the current 50%

remission to a full 100% remission would become effective with the 2007 fall semester. The current, 50% remission for qualifying veterans, in place since the program was enacted in July 2005, would continue until the expansion becomes effective next year.

To qualify for the program, a veteran must have been a Wisconsin resident at the time of entry onto active military duty, must be a Wisconsin resident for the purposes of receiving state veterans benefits at the time of applying for the tuition benefit, must have been discharged under honorable conditions, and must meet qualifying military service requirements.

Dependents of qualifying veterans who died in the line of duty, or who have been rendered significantly disabled by their military service are currently eligible for a full waiver of tuition and fees under the Wisconsin G.I. Bill. For eligibility under the disability provision, the veteran must have a current service-connected disability rating of at least 30%.

Support by the Legislature was near unanimous, with 89 original cosponsors that included Senators Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau), Ron Brown (R-Eau Claire), and Roger Breske (D-Eland), and Representatives John Gard (R-Peshtigo), Gabe Loeffelholz (R-Platteville), and Bob Turner (D-Racine).

The bill now awaits the Governor's action.

To claim Wisconsin G.I. Bill benefits, eligibility must be established with the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), and the WDVA certification must be provided to the student's Wisconsin technical college or UW campus. To apply, applicants should use "Wisconsin Tuition Programs for Veterans and Dependents: Information, Forms, and Instructions," WDVA B0105.

The booklet and additional information is available on the Internet at www.dva.state.wi.us, by contacting the local county veterans service officer, or by calling WDVA toll-free at 1-800-WIS-VETS (1-800-947-8387). The booklet and forms would be updated when the increased remission level becomes effective in fall 2007.